

Viewpoint

Are development agencies disengaging from development education?

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In the emergent period of development education (DE) practice in Ireland and the UK, development agencies were the mainstay of the sector. Most development education centres (DECs) - NGOs entirely focused on the delivery of development education services - were largely sustained with support from agency grants. Indeed, many DECs were set up by development agencies in the 1970s and 1980s as necessary agents of awareness raising and social change at a time of limited public engagement with development issues.

My own organisation, the Centre for Global Education, is an example of a DEC established twenty years ago by eight development agencies in the aftermath of the Ethiopian famine of 1984-85. The founders of the Centre recognised how negative stereotypes of developing countries dominated discourse on the developing world at that time, especially countries in Africa. The founding agencies resolved to challenge these stereotypes by creating an NGO in Belfast that engendered a more positive and informed perspective on poor countries. This decision was also partly based on the lack of capacity within some agencies to deliver development education as part of their own work.

In this formative stage of development education delivery, the policy and funding framework for the sector was extremely weak and the British and Irish governments were less engaged with public awareness work at home. Indeed, in its 1999 strategy paper *Building Support for Development*, the UK's Department for International Development (DfID) candidly accepted that:

“For much of the last 20 years, the UK government has attached little importance to development education work in the UK, leaving others, particularly the network of Development Education Centres and others in the voluntary sector, to take the lead in promoting greater awareness

and understanding”.

In the case of the Centre for Global Education, most of our funding between 1986 and 1999 came in the form of grants from development agencies with limited and irregular support from the two governments.

That situation has changed dramatically over the past decade with the Centre, like many NGOs in these islands, receiving a sharp increase in government support. In the south of Ireland, the development sector is largely resourced with grants from Irish Aid (the department responsible for overseas aid and development education) and in the UK there is a similar scenario with increased grant support from DfID. Moreover, both governments have delivered their financial support within a policy framework backed up by strategy documents that have served to further mainstream development education practice within the wider formal and non-formal sectors.

Since 1997, the British government has published three White Papers on international development that make explicit reference to the need for strengthened awareness raising across civil society and, in 2006, the Irish government launched its first White Paper for the development sector. The two governments now have a shared policy commitment to awareness raising work across society, recognising the capacity of development education as an agent of change through active citizenship.

This newly strengthened policy environment for development education has given renewed vigour to the sector and given it a statutory platform from which to build links across civil society. However, this period of increased governmental engagement with development education has regrettably been characterised by a gradual disengagement by many of the NGOs that were the mainstay of the sector.

In the south of Ireland, for example, a recent membership survey by Dóchas (April 2007) - the Irish national platform of non-governmental development organisations - revealed an alarming picture of under-investment in development education activities. Almost half of the 35 (out of 37) members surveyed (49 per cent) spent less than one per cent of their 2005 income ‘on development education activities’ and almost two-thirds of members (69 per cent) spent less than 5 per cent. In real terms, development education expenditure by Dóchas members in 2005 amounted to €3,363,297 from a total expenditure of €257.84m in the same year.

Although the survey concerns agencies based in Ireland, a similar scenario appears to have taken root in the UK within organisations that were traditional carriers of the development education sector either as donors or deliverers of practice. Moreover, those agencies that continue to provide

development education grants to external organisations have increasingly gravitated toward conditional terms of support. In essence this means that applicants are required to deliver projects, often within a year, focusing on areas of education specified by the donor.

The implications of the grant relationship for applicants include adjusting their work to meet funding criteria rather than pursuing strategic organisational objectives. Similarly, applicants may have to further diversify their work to deliver a new project rather than consolidating their existing activities. Most importantly, however, is the reduced level of core support given to development education organisations in a sector with extremely limited funding options. Without core support from their traditional funding base – development agencies – many DEC's and other small NGOs are operating within narrow financial margins that often prevent forward planning and create constant insecurity.

Despite funding constraints, development education organisations deliver professional education services to a wide range of target groups within civil society. Maintaining the quality of these services will not only benefit learners but the development sector as a whole through increased public engagement with development issues. Development agencies would strengthen the development education sector if they supported groups on the basis of their overall operational performance rather than encouraging a further dilution of their output by only supporting new projects. There is ultimately limited added value for a small NGO taking up an agency grant if it adds to the workload of staff and draws the organisation into a new area of activity. Most agencies are reluctant to support DEC's for the work that they are currently delivering and require them to create something new. This approach is detrimental to the sector when funding could be better spent in strengthening the organisational base of development education providers.

In the context of declining agency support an increasing number of DEC's are seeking either DfID or Irish Aid funding for development education projects. The sector has welcomed the steady increase in government funding and many DEC's have successfully bid for grants. However, the increasing reliance on government support and imbalance in government/NGO funding could signal further problems for the sector. There is the possibility of self-censorship in carrying out our role as government partner and critical friend. Grant recipients may, even sub-consciously, adopt a less radical and progressive approach to development education to offset the possibility of failure in the bidding process or hinder the success of future bids. Moreover, it is structurally dangerous to rely heavily on one funding partner of any description no matter how secure future support may appear.

This is not to criticise governments for increasing their development education budgets! We have long sought a scenario where government agencies would become leading players in the policy and funding framework for development education. What is advocated here is a restoration or enhancement of development agency support for DE both within their organisational structures and in regard to development education budgets. The sector needs lead development agencies to resource their own development education work to a much higher level and to enhance their grant support for external groups.

It is fully recognised that development agencies have a broad remit including humanitarian aid and relief, campaigns, fundraising, emergencies/appeals, advocacy and development education. Moreover, agencies are often competing with each other and other charities/NGOs for public money which can result in fluctuating incomes and reduced departmental budgets. But all too often development education has been an easy target for reduced expenditure – attitudinal change induced by DE can be difficult to quantify and evaluate, and outcomes are not always tangible as they can be in areas like fundraising.

But the level of public engagement in recent years with development issues should trigger an increase in DE budgets not a further retreat in expenditure. The level of public interest and active engagement with development issues has never been higher as evidenced by the growth of ‘do-it-yourself NGOs’ - small initiatives aimed at linking groups in Ireland with villages and communities in the global south - and the myriad of ‘direct aid’ initiatives which target specific humanitarian needs in the global south.

In 2005, we witnessed a magnificent public response to the Make Poverty History (MPH) initiative and the global clamouring for action on trade, debt and globalisation. What became obvious during the MPH campaign was the need for a stronger DE component to sustain the involvement of the public and deepen their knowledge and understanding of the issues. Agencies should not regard DE as a separate strand from their other activities but an integral, interweaving element that will sustain momentum behind all their work.

The Dóchas survey shows that in 2006 the total membership of the network could call on 850,000 supporters. But to what extent are these constituents in receipt of DE and being encouraged to engage with their organisations beyond donations and postcard campaigns? Development education can foster the deeper engagement that Ireland and its European partners need to ensure that governments and inter-governmental bodies respond to the needs of the poor.

But part of the process of re-engaging development agencies with DE

requires development education organisations to question their own effectiveness in pressing the case for increased support from agencies and promoting the effective work that they are delivering throughout the island. The recent emergence of the Irish Development Education Association (IDEA) may provide a more unified voice in the sector that can more forcefully articulate the needs of its members.

We need IDEA (and other development networks) to enter into dialogue with lead agencies and identify the factors that are squeezing development education budgets. This will require all practitioners, possibly through IDEA, to better promote the effectiveness of their work, spell out the need for DE, and present development agencies with a realistic, timetabled proposal for increased funding for the sector. This proposal should include the provision of core funding rather than a requirement to deliver new projects.

If current trends continue development education will become increasingly marginalised within lead agencies and DE budgets steadily diminished. The sector would not only lose a valuable source of financial support but the considerable expertise and resources that development agencies bring to development education. Many agencies have a long and distinguished association with development education and the sector as a whole needs that to continue.